SOME ASPECTS OF RENAISSANCE SLAVERY

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One of the most intriguing aspects of the period known as the Renaissance is the way in which a revival of interest in the classical epoch coincided with the discovery of new lands beyond the sea. The expansion of intellectual horizons engendered by the convergence of these two worlds, the new and the old, into the Europe of the sixteenth century was bound to produce problems, but none more vivid than the issue of slavery. For the resurgence of the institution of slavery caused by geographic expansion raised new theoretical questions concerning its legitimacy, and in answering such questions Renaissance philosophers and jurists naturally sought aid from the classics.

The ancient world offered two broad justifications for slavery. The first, widely espoused by the Greeks and expressed most systematically by Aristotle, maintained that some men lacked sufficient rational capacity to govern themselves. Such men were "natural slaves". This natural slavery was useful not only to the masters, who benefited from the labor performed by the slave, but also to the slaves who received wise direction and supervision which they were incapable of achieving on their own. Indeed, Aristotle believed so strongly in the utility and desirability of natural slavery that he even advocated as one of the legitimate aims of war the enslavement of "those who deserve to be slaves." This theory was challenged by the jurists of ancient Rome, who argued that slavery did not exist in the earliest societies and therefore could not be termed "natural". The Justinian Code, in fact, declared slavery to be contrary to natural law. The jurists traced the origin of slavery instead to human law and specifically to the practice of enslaving captured prisoners of war. Indeed, Florentinus argued that the very word for slave, "servus", was derived from the act of saving the life of a defeated enemy soldier by enslaving rather than slaying him. Slavery is thus justified as a useful and even charitable institution created by human law in response to the exigencies of war. By the same logic, one could support the extension of slavery to criminals, debtors, and others who might otherwise suffer death.

A basically similar position was adopted by the early Church. St. Augustine, who typified as well as helped shape Patristic thought on the subject, contended that originally all men were free and that slavery only
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came into existence with the advent of war. Augustine merely added the dimensions of sin and salvation to Roman legal theory. Slavery was a consequence of the Fall, a necessary punishment for sin, such as an unjust war. However, all men were still equal in the eyes of God and thus inwardly free and eligible for salvation.

This explanation of slavery was the generally accepted one in Europe until the thirteenth century, when St. Thomas, as part of his general attempt to synthesize Christian and Aristotelian thought, sought to reconcile their different justifications of slavery. While his conclusions were somewhat ambiguous, he appeared to endorse Aristotle, particularly where he remarked that it was natural for the slave to be controlled by the wiser man and the wiser man to be assisted by the slave. Followers of St. Thomas like Ptolemy of Lucca and Egidius Colonna unquestionably accepted the Aristotelian theory of natural slavery. Thus the concept of natural slavery was revived prior to the Renaissance and, hence, by the time the age of exploration got underway, it had achieved considerable intellectual respectability. Nor were its adherents confined solely to Thomistic theologians. The fifteenth century jurist Bartolomeo Coepolla cited Aristotle to prove that slavery was derived from natural law, while Castiglione, writing in the early sixteenth century, followed Aristotle in justifying wars waged “in order to subject those who by nature deserve to be slaves. . .”

Consequently, it is hardly surprising that when strange new lands were discovered containing strange people practicing strange customs, the views of Aristotle were invoked. For at first glance the Indians of the New World appeared to fit his description of the natural slave. They were illiterate; those first encountered were still living at a relatively primitive technological and economic level and seemed to lack a highly developed system of government; and some appeared, at least in Spanish eyes, to be alternately vicious and lazy. In the words of a Spanish clergyman, the Licentiate Gregorio, the Indians were “like animals who talk.” In his view, they lacked sufficient judgment and understanding to govern themselves, the very criterion established by Aristotle in order to determine whether a man was a natural slave. The Scottish theologian John Major went so far as to argue that inhabitants of lands near the Equator, where the Indians lived, were geographically and astrologically bound to be barbarians and, thus, natural slaves. Major employed his knowledge of the classics to invoke the support of Ptolemy for his proposition. Later in the sixteenth century, the great Aristotelian scholar Juan Gines de Sepúlveda faithfully followed his master’s arguments in defending the doctrine of natural slavery, which he proceeded to apply to the Indians. In Sepúlveda’s view, the barbaric nature of the Indians justified their conquest because they naturally deserved to be slaves.